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THE TYSON LECTURESHIP FOUNDATION FOR
THE PROMOTION OF CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE

The Progressive Revelation of the Bible

BY

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Honorary Vicar of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine

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The Progressive Revelation of the Bible

*By Stuart L. Tyson, M.A. (Oxon.), Honorary
Vicar of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine*

MILLIONS of orthodox Christians still think of the Bible as a single, inerrant volume, every portion of which is not only equally inspired by the Spirit of God, but altogether consistent and harmonious with every other portion, so that it contains no error or contradiction, whether in the sphere of Religion, Ethics, or Science. This unfortunate inheritance from medieval Europe, which makes it impossible for millions of other people to find in it much else than hopeless stumbling blocks, is the result of a long and complex historical process, and has no real basis in the Biblical documents themselves. Briefly summarized, the most important stages in this process are as follows:

The Founder of Christianity delivered His message verbally, in a provincial Semitic dialect known as Aramaic, which as the vernacular of northern Palestine was understood by only a small fraction of the human race. Chiefly, in the first instance, through the amazing genius and heroic labors of the converted rabbi, Paul, who, directly or indirectly, planted churches westward from Jerusalem over well nigh the entire Empire, the ideas of this message were translated into Greek, a tongue now almost

universal throughout the world; and it was as a Greek-speaking Society that the Church set out to convert mankind. The twenty-seven Christian documents which at a later time were gathered together into an authoritative or canonical collection, on the basis that each was written either by an Apostle or by one within the Apostolic circle, and called at a still later period "The New Testament," were originally written in Greek, which tongue for several generations continued to be the language of Christians as far west as Rome.

Originally the only "Bible" of the Christian Society consisted of the Jewish Scriptures, containing thirty-nine documents as we reckon them today. These alone constitute "the Scriptures" so frequently referred to by New Testament writers. This miscellaneous library of Hebrew religion was inevitably taken over into the new society, primarily because all of Christ's first disciples were Jews, who believed their collection of sacred writings not only directly given by God, but also to point unerringly to Christ. No thought of a possible rival to these books ever entered a primitive Christian's heart, for at least two very obvious reasons. On the one hand, the sacred collection or "Canon" of inspired writings had been formally closed; on the other, all alike expected the speedy return of Christ and the consequent end of the world. When an early Christian did write, it was to deal with conditions in the brief, transitory period between the two comings

of the Lord. He was "at hand," and at any moment might reappear. Failure to realize the obvious circumstances under which early Christians composed their respective documents has been a not infrequent source of failure to the understanding of the books of the New Testament. Even the briefest reflection must make it clear that no *ex post facto* process can possibly alter their intrinsic character, either in the way of addition or subtraction. Each, to be understood, must first be placed in its own historical, literary and intellectual context, and the writer's own purpose and meaning fully grasped. Then, and not till then, may his thought legitimately be translated into terms of today.

The Jewish Scriptures, the sole "Bible" of the Church of the first century, and long afterwards called "The Old Testament," were originally written in Hebrew. By the opening of the Christian era, however, through the labors of Jewish scholars at Alexandria, they had been translated into Greek, and it is from this translation that they are usually cited by New Testament writers. The Greek translation of the different Hebrew documents had been undertaken intermittently, over a period of perhaps two hundred years, and although of very varying value, soon came to be regarded by the Christian Society as of equal inspiration with the Hebrew original. In many instances, however, serious errors of translation had been made, which are occasionally reproduced by New Testament writers. Among the more im-

portant is the quotation from Isaiah vii, 14, "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son" in St. Matt. 1, 23, which in the Hebrew original denotes "a young woman of marriageable age," without reference to her condition.

Although, as has been said, Greek was the language of the early Church, by the third century Latin had become a formidable rival in the West, and was soon to supplant it altogether. Some imperfect translations of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures had already been made into this language, but by the opening of the fifth century there was imperative need for a more accurate and official version in this tongue, to which all could appeal with confidence. The task was entrusted to Jerome, the greatest scholar of his day, and was completed not many years before his death in 420 A.D. For the next thousand years this Latin version was the only form of the Scriptures known to the peoples of Europe, and its influence in moulding theological thought, not only in the Roman, but in the Reformed Churches as well, can hardly be exaggerated. To take but a single illustration: practically all the theological terms of every Western Church—"miracle," a term which Jerome did not once employ throughout the New Testament, would be a striking exception—come ultimately from the Latin Bible or Vulgate of this fifth century Christian Father. This circumstance would have little significance were it not for the fact that it is impossible, even with the best

will in the world, to translate Greek into Latin, and at the same time preserve the thought of the original. An entirely different set of ideas circles round such crucial terms as "grace," "repentance," "conversion," "justification"—not to mention a host of others—which not infrequently are quite alien to the thought of the original. Inferences quite legitimately drawn from a Latin term or phrase are in great numbers of cases entirely precluded by the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek. And it should be remembered that these Latin terms were continually acquiring ampler and more authoritative significance. Hence it was inevitable that this augmented meaning should be read back into other apparently parallel passages of Scripture, and the cumulative effect of this process was to give a quite new conception to the ideas of the Biblical writers.

Now the Church of the early centuries thought of its collection of religious writings as a miscellaneous library, and in fact one of its titles for the whole was "The Divine Library." Perhaps the commonest term for the entire collection of sixty-six volumes, Jewish and Christian, was "*Ta Hagia Biblia*," "The Sacred Books or Rolls." For each volume was in the form of a roll, which in Greek, the early tongue of Christianity, is *Biblion*, plural *Biblia*. Jerome translated the adjective, but unfortunately only transliterated the noun, so that in the Latin Scriptures or Vulgate the title becomes *Biblia Sacra*. But while the Greek noun *Biblia*, as

said above, is plural, and means "The Books," the theologians of later Europe, who knew only Latin, treated it as a singular term, "The Book," and this erroneous conception, aided by the now elaborately developed theories as to the nature of its inspiration, ultimately became universal.

In England Jerome's transliteration of the Greek *Biblia*, "The Books," was once again transliterated, and hence the term "Bible," with the wholly inaccurate connotation of "the Book." Coincidentally another conception was in course of evolution; and ultimately the two, joining hands, almost wholly de-humanized the Divine Library of Christendom, reducing it to an inerrant *Corpus* of proof texts, employed only too often to demonstrate that other Christians were disloyal to Christ. This other conception arose as follows: Our Lord rejected the notion of an external, infallible court of appeal on earth. He taught that "the kingdom of God is within you," and that "He that willeth to do His Will, shall know of the teaching, whether it be of God." But the Church had scarcely passed out into the Empire ere there arose the theory, later hardened into a universal belief, that the verdict of the collective Episcopate did in fact constitute just such an infallible tribunal in the sphere of faith and morals. Needless to say, this court tended to become slowly but surely centralized. The Protestant Reformers, in breaking with the medieval church, did not dream of abandoning the conception of an infallible tribunal here on

earth; they simply transferred the notion from the collective Episcopate to a Book.

Henceforth whatever was contained between the covers of the Bible was indubitably true for all time, and as a result we have the Bryans, the Volivas, and the pre-millenarians of today; men presenting the strange anomaly of a bitter antagonism to the Roman Catholic Church, yet differing fundamentally not at all from the most extreme ultramontane. The former denies the infallibility of the Church, and postulates the infallibility of the Bible: the latter affirms the infallibility of the Church, and denies the infallibility of the Bible, save in so far as its meaning is determined by the afore-said infallible Church.

This conception of the Divine Library of Christendom as an inerrant compendium of religious and scientific knowledge, is thus the outgrowth of a long and intricate historical process, and not only completely ignores the *data* of the documents themselves, but is in entire opposition to the facts of history. Starting from the *a priori* conception of what the Bible must be, modifying or contrary evidence is either ignored or treated absolutely arbitrarily. The modern student, calling to his aid the principles of literary and historical criticism, and having as his only goal the attainment of Truth irrespective of theological prepossession, necessarily reverses the process. The gathering of the evidence must obviously precede the formulation of the conclusion; and the latter

will be sound only to the degree in which it is based upon the former. That conclusions undergo modification from time to time is only what is to be expected. Truth, indeed, is one, indivisible and eternal; but our knowledge of Truth is relative. Yet the degree of relativity grows less, as, with the passage of time, ever fresh evidence is discovered, current sciences are perfected, and both newer and more adequate modes of thought are evolved.

This process is clearly enough witnessed to in the Bible, whose documents it would not be inaccurate to characterize as constituting a Serial Story, registering "in many portions and in many manners" throughout the several chapters the evolution of the knowledge of God, first in one branch of the Semitic race known as the Hebrews; and then, through them, continuing the story among the followers of the Nazarene in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman world up to about A.D. 130.

The Old Testament, consisting of thirty-nine volumes, falls into three broad divisions, known respectively as the Law, the Prophets, and the Other Writings, the first of which came to be regarded as authoritative or canonical about B.C. 300, the second perhaps a hundred years later, and the third about two generations before the coming of Christ. But although the five books of the Law, the nucleus of the Hebrew Bible, were the first portion to be canonized, in their present form they are far from being the earliest religious documents of

this people. Folk song and ballad, originally handed down verbally, then gathered into volumes such as "The Book of the Wars of Jehovah (Numbers 21:14) and "The Book of Jashar" (Josh. 10:13; 2 Samuel 1:18)—works utterly perished save for some precious extracts in later writings—constituted the beginnings of Hebrew literature.

The earliest extant portion of the Bible was compiled about the ninth century B.C., and consisted of a primitive code of laws, suited to a nomadic or pastoral people. With this were combined tribal traditions and legends as to the origin of the world and its history up to the writer's day. Naturally it is simple in the extreme. God is but a magnified man, non-ethical, and of highly limited attributes. He moulds the full length adult form of the first man out of dirt, and then breathes life into the sculptured clay. Unable to find from among the animals a help adequate to Adam's needs, He anaesthetizes him; and, removing a bone, builds from it a being called woman, who ultimately proves rather more than adequate to his requirements. Just whom the surviving son of the first pair marries is not stated, but ere long his descendants have founded a great civilization. This primitive God frustrates an attempt to build a tower to heaven by making each workman speak in a language no one else can understand, and so destroys the possibility of co-operation. Thus the origin of the diversity of tongues is explained. The

Maker of man regularly accepted food from His people; and as He "smelled the sweet savour" of the animal which Noah had prepared for Him He promised He would never again send a devastating flood upon the earth. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob lie, not to mention their commission of other irregularities, and the matter is not regarded as serious. And so on. The primitive document registers the beginnings of Israel's religious belief, and requires no defence. The people are given just so much religious and moral truth, and of such a quality, as they are capable of assimilating. The finished product is not given in religion, any more than in nature, at the beginning. Just as in the history of living things there is at first the simple, single-celled organism, from which, by almost infinite integration and differentiation there is at length evolved the marvellous being called man, so from these tiny beginnings of Israel's thought there ultimately arises the most perfect religion known to the human race. It is not for us to say beforehand what method God *ought* to have employed in either case. It is our high duty to ascertain from science and from the history of religion what method He has in fact employed, and then to adapt our thinking to these ascertained truths. If early Hebrew belief and practice are primitive, it is because the race is as yet incapable of deeper spiritual thought. It is entirely out of place either to condemn or to endeavour to explain away their simple conceptions; and altogether incompatible with Truth

to pretend that their beliefs can be reconciled either with modern science or with the principles of the Christian religion. If they can assimilate but little at first, when they have made what they have their own, more will be given; and this increased knowledge will require modification of previous belief and practice. Now this truth of *progressive* revelation, which the mere traditionalist has so completely lost sight of, runs right through not only the documents of the Bible, but all human history. The old is constantly being displaced in favor of the new, and a continuously truer and more adequate religious conception is the result. In the documents of the Bible we see the progress as illustrated in the religious experiences of that race which has consistently looked out on life from the standpoint of religion.

About a hundred years after the preparation of the early document referred to above, another code and series of traditions, representing somewhat more advanced thought, were compiled, and soon after these two documents were welded into one continuous whole.

Now occurs, in the eighth century, an event of momentous significance; namely the appearance of the writing prophets. Such men as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah, under the illumination of the Spirit of God, entirely transformed the conception of Israel's religion, and indeed have left an indelible mark upon a large part of all subsequent religious history. Hitherto the mass of the people had acknowl-

edged the existence of many gods, though worshipping one, their own tribal god Yahweh or "Jehovah," whose jurisdiction was limited to Canaan. Jephthah's complaint to the invading Ammonites, "Wilt thou not possess that (land) which Chemosh thy god giveth thee to possess" (Judges 12, 24)? Expresses the popular belief. "There is no God save one!" cry the prophets. These other alleged beings are but figments of human imagination. "The living God," as He tends henceforth to be called, is the sole maker of heaven and earth. Thus the old commandment, "thou shalt *have* no other gods but me," comes to be construed as meaning "thou shalt not *believe* that there are any gods but me." Deeper knowledge of Truth has involved a modification of earlier belief. But it is not only the substitution of monotheism for monolatry which marks the writings of the prophets; the very nature of God Himself is transformed under their influence. God is now an ethical being, who is not interested in ritual conformity to an external code, but in inner purity of life. "I desire loving kindness and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings," is the substance of the new message.

Under the influence of this teaching Deuteronomy, perhaps the most spiritual book of the Old Testament, was compiled. It is a prophetic reformulation of earlier codes, and with its teaching as to centralization of worship at Jerusalem profoundly modified the thought and prac-

tice of the later church. Then as now, however, there were two conceptions of Religion—the priestly and the prophetic, the Catholic and the Protestant. How far the prophetic teaching influenced much of the current orthodoxy is still doubtful. Certainly the priestly standpoint was very much in evidence during the years of captivity in Babylonia; and in the sixth and fifth centuries, members of this caste compiled, in part relying upon Babylonian theology, what is called the Priestly Codex, a dry, legalistic document with long genealogies, rubrical directions, and liturgical explanations as to the origin of festivals and fasts.

The final step in the formation of the Jewish Law is the welding together of these various codes into one more or less harmonious whole, the work of the scholarly Ezra and his successors in the fifth and following centuries. At the beginning is placed a truly majestic section from the priests' code—the first chapter of Genesis—then a parallel narrative from an earlier document. Hence we find the entirely different story of Creation in chapter two, which under no conceivable circumstances can be harmonized with the account given in chapter one. But such harmonization is wholly unnecessary. The documents represent two stages, separated by several centuries, in the evolution of the knowledge of God. Each has its own religious and scientific standpoint, which is that of the age in which the respective work was compiled. Each is parabolic, and adapted to the intelligence and

spiritual capacity of the men for whom it was written. That the chronological sequence of the stories happens to be reversed in our Bible is of small moment, since it is a simple matter in our reading to correct it. This general method of amalgamating the various documents was followed by Ezra and his colleagues throughout. Sometimes they insert a phrase, a clause, or a paragraph from one book, followed by similar matter from another, so that, in cases like the Flood Story, the result is a mosaic. At other times a document is permitted to stand almost untouched, as in the case of Deuteronomy or Leviticus. The final result of the monumental work of these editors was not only the five books which today stand first in our Bible, but several more in the Old Testament which immediately follow them. Their several *strata* were compiled at different periods between the ninth and (perhaps) fourth century B.C., and when placed in chronological sequence bear remarkable witness to an ever deepening, ever more adequate faith and practice. It is not that Truth has changed during the centuries: it is simply that with increasing spiritual capacity less adequate conceptions are discarded in favour of more adequate ones. And the whole of human history demonstrates that this is a continuous process.

Following the Restoration in the sixth century, when in scattered groups the exiles began to return, the message of the prophets tended gradually to become formal and stereotyped, and as a result their influence slowly but surely

waned." At length, with "Malachi" in the fifth century, the prophetic succession is brought to a definite close, with the result that there is no longer an official interpreter of the Divine mind. Coincidentally there is brought to Jerusalem the completed Law, which soon comes to be regarded as embodying "the Faith once for all delivered to the saints," the full and final revelation of Almighty God. Yet events proved it to be neither the one nor the other. The Serial Story was to be continued.

Although the line of the prophets had been brought to a close: although many religious leaders summoned the faithful to the Law and to the Testimony as to the *fons et origo* of Truth, it was inevitable that deepening spiritual capacity and understanding should find expression. Those who had been illumined to discover new truth could not but impart it to others. Just as writers like Jeremiah and Ezekiel had corrected the pagan teaching of the primitive commandment, that God visited His wrath upon the innocent descendants of a sinner to the third and fourth generation, when they wrote, "Ye shall no more utter this proverb, 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge': the soul that sinneth, it (*i.e.* it alone) shall die," so many others, each to the degree of his spiritual understanding, contributed his quota to the Sum of Truth. Thus the problem of suffering is nobly worked out in the book of Job, the all embracing love of God is parabolically set forth in Jonah. Ex-

quisite hymns of lofty thought and deepest devotion are added to the Psalter. An acquaintance with Greek thought produces the Wisdom literature, as illustrated by such writings as "Ecclesiasticus" and "Wisdom." Most significant of all, perhaps, in the two centuries before Christ, come into being the Apocalyptic writers, who carry on and develop the Serial Story of Revelation until it is taken up by the Founder of Christianity and His followers.

Writing in large part in Galilee, these pseudonymous mystics and seers, of whom the author of the book of Daniel is perhaps the earliest (and whose successors wrote too late to secure canonization for their documents), immeasurably transcended the prophets in the sweep of their vision, even though their literary form is often fantastic, and their conception of the Divine Nature immensely influenced by legalistic thought. Heretofore it had been believed that at death man passed out of God's loving care, and went, a nerveless shadow of his former self, into a vast subterranean cavern—the "hell" of the Old Testament. There, in neither pain nor joy, he continued indefinitely a shadowy existence. Only those who were alive at the Messiah's coming would share in the glories of His Kingdom, the scene of which was to be the earthly Jerusalem.

In the hands of these mystics, with their vastly deepened religious experience and therefore far more profound spiritual beliefs, all these ideas become transformed. It is through them

that at length there emerges for the Jewish people a clear belief in a blessed immortality with God, now no longer in the earthly, but in the heavenly Jerusalem. To them also we owe the belief in the resurrection of the body. The underworld will eventually give up its dead; and, difficult then as it is to so many now, to postulate personal survival apart from a resuscitation of the body, they teach that each spirit will find its own body, which, reassembled and in a quasi-physical state, will pass to a deathless life in the "heavens."

So Christ comes, and once more transforms the current beliefs. Writing nothing Himself, He finds His first interpreter in the converted rabbi Paul, the most remarkable character and brilliant genius whom Christianity has produced. A true mystic, who with surpassing insight pictures the Christ of his inner experience, he expounds the very heart of His teaching, albeit in part the picture is in Rabbinic, in part in Graeco-Roman setting. What Paul so profoundly exhibits is that Religion is neither a code of ethics nor a body of formulated beliefs, but a *life*, derived from and lived in Christ, the perfect revealer of God. This life, freely given to all who will turn to the light, so transforms the personality that in his pregnant words, to be "in Christ" is to be a new creature. And this new life is offered to *all* men, irrespective of aught else save the desire to know and follow the Truth. Externalism in religion, Jewish or otherwise, has been brought to a complete end in

Christ; while the tendency of the human heart to bind itself with the chains of ecclesiasticism has constantly to be resisted. "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free, and be not again entangled in a yoke of bondage," is his ringing cry which comes down through the centuries.

Soon after Paul's death, a bi-lingual Jewish Christian named John Mark, who for some time had been paraphrasing into Greek Peter's Aramaic sermons at Rome, is asked to put down the substance of these sermons in narrative form, and the result is our earliest, shortest, and simplest Gospel. Within twenty-five years two writers, Luke, a European physician converted by Paul, and an unknown Palestinian Christian, had embodied Mark's Gospel and a collection of sayings of Christ, these latter compiled, probably, in the first instance, by Matthew the Apostle, into much longer documents, each with an interpretation of Christ based upon the author's respective religious teaching and environment. Hence our Gospels according to "Matthew" and Luke. The latter wrote a second volume, taking up the story where he had laid it down in the first, his object being to trace the course of Christianity from its birth in Jerusalem, the capital of the Jewish world, until it found lodgment in Rome, the capital of all the world.

Passing by the lesser books, there is at length published, far out in the heart of the Greek world, the great theological treatise called the

Gospel according to St. John. The ripe fruit of perhaps fifty years' meditation upon the inner meaning of the life and Person of Christ, the author, who is the mystic *par excellence* of the New Testament, and one to whom ideas, rather than events, are the only realities, interprets our Lord out of the fulness of his own communion with Him. Writing at about the end of the first century, he endeavours to show, *inter alia*, that this Christ of Christian experience is at once the Divine Logos and identical with the Jesus of history.

Such are some of the chief chapters in the Serial Story of the Bible. At first primitive, at times barbaric: when we place the documents in their chronological sequence and free them from theological encrustations, we observe, as out of tiny beginnings the story develops and expands, a sure and steady upward growth, "in many portions and in many manners": culminating at length in what is confessedly the most perfect Religion that man has experienced in his long and chequered history.

And so modern critical and historical research gives us back our Bible, no longer an impossible Book full of moral and intellectual stumbling blocks, but an orderly record of progressive revelation, charged with vital meaning in our religious, social and political problems today.

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